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For The Times.

A WIFE BY A FIRE.

THERE was once a very great banker in London, who had a very fine house in Portland Place, and a very dirty old house in the city; and if the latter looked the image of business and riches, the former looked the picture of luxury and display. He himself was a mild man, whose ostentation was of a quiet, but not the less of an active kind. His movements were always calm and tranquil, and his clothes plain; but the former were stately, the latter were in the best fashion. Holditch was his coachmaker in those days; Ude's first cousin was his cook; his servants walked up stairs to announce a visitor to the time of the Dead March in Saul, and opened both valves of the folding doors at once with a grace that could only be acquired by long practice. Every thing seemed to move in his house by rule, and nothing was ever seen to go wrong. All the lackeys wore powder, and the women servants had their caps prescribed to them. His wife was the daughter of a country gentleman of a very old race, a woman of good manners, and a warm heart. Though there were two carriages always at her especial command, she sometimes walked on her feet, even in London, and would not suffer an account of her parties to find its way into the "Morning Post." The banker and his wife had but one child, a daughter, and a very pretty and very sweet girl she was as ever my eyes saw. She was not very tall, though very beautifully formed, and exquisitely graceful. She was, indeed, the least affected person that ever was seen, for, accustomed from her very earliest days, to perfect ease in every respect—denied nothing that was virtuous and right—taught by her mother to estimate high qualities—too much habituated to wealth to regard it as an object—and too frequently brought in contact with rank to estimate it above its value—she had nothing to covet, and nothing to assume. Her face was sweet and thoughtful, though the thoughts were evidently cheerful ones, and her voice was full of melody and gentleness. Her name was Alice Herbert, and she was soon admired of all admirers. People looked for her at the opera and the park, declared her beautiful, adorable, divine; she became the wonder, the rage, the fashion; and every body added when they spoke about her, that she would have a million at least. Now, Mr. Herbert himself was not at all anxious that his daughter should marry any of the men that first presented themselves, because none of them were above the rank of a baron; nor was Mrs. Herbert anxious either, because, she did not wish to part with her daughter; nor was Alice herself—I do not know well why—perhaps she thought that a part of the men who surrounded her were fops, and as many more were libertines, and the rest were fools, and Alice did not feel more inclined to choose out of these three classes than her father did out of the three inferior grades of our nobility. There was, indeed, a young man, in the Guards, distantly connected with her mother's family, who was neither fop, libertine nor fool—gentleman, an accomplished man, and a man of good feeling, who was often at Mr. Herbert's house, but father, mother and daughter, all thought him out of the question; the father, because he was not a duke; the mother, because he was a soldier; and the daughter, because he had never given her the slightest reason to believe that he either admired or loved her. As he had some two thousand a year, he might have been a good match for a clergyman's daughter, but could not pretend to Miss Herbert. Alice certainly liked him better than any man she had ever seen, and once she found his eyes fixed upon her from the other side of a ball room with an expression that made her forget what her partner was saying to her. The color came up into her cheek, too, and that seemed to give Henry Ashton courage

to come up and ask her to dance. She danced with him the following night, too; and Mr. Herbert, who remarked the fact, judged that it would be but right to give Henry Ashton a hint. Two days later, as Alice's father was just about to go out, the young guardsman himself was ushered into his library, and the banker prepared to give his hint, and give it plainly, too. He was saved the trouble, however—for Ashton's first speech was, "I have come to bid farewell, Mr. Herbert. We are ordered to Canada to put down the evil spirit there. I set out in an hour to take leave of my mother, in Staffordshire, and then embark with all speed."

Mr. Herbert economized his hint, and wished his young friend all success. "By the way," he added, "Mrs. Herbert may like to write a few lines by you to her brother in Montreal. You know he is her only brother; he made a sad business of it, what with building and planting, and farming and such things. So I got him an appointment in Canada just that he might retrieve. She would like to write, I know. You will find her up stairs. I must go out now myself. Good fortune attend you."

Good fortune did attend him, for he found Alice Herbert alone in the very first room he entered. There was a table before her, and she was leaning over it, as if very busy, but when Henry Ashton approached her, he found that she had been carelessly drawing wild leaves on a scrap of paper, while her thoughts were far away. She colored when she saw him, and was evidently agitated; but she was still more so when he repeated what he had told her father. She turned red, and she turned pale, and she sat still and she said nothing. Henry Ashton became agitated himself. "It is all in vain," he said to himself. "It is all in vain. I know her father too well;" and he rose, asking her where he should find her mother.

Alice answered in a faint voice, "in the little room beyond the back drawing room."

Henry paused a moment longer; the temptation was too great to be resisted; he took the sweet girl's hand; he pressed it to his lips, and said, "Farewell, Miss Herbert, farewell! I know I shall never see any one like you again; but at least, it is a blessing to have known you—though it be but to regret that fortune has not favored me still farther! farewell! farewell!"

Henry Ashton sailed for Canada, and saw some service there. He distinguished himself as an officer, and his name was in several despatches. A remnant of the old chivalrous spirit made him often think when he was attacking a fortified village, or charging a body of insurgents, "Alice Herbert will hear of this!" but often, too, he would ask himself, "I wonder if she be married yet?" and his companions used to jest with him upon always looking first at the women's part of the newspaper; the births, deaths and marriages.

His fears, if we can venture to call them such, were vain. Alice did not marry, although about a year after Henry Ashton had quitted England, her father descended a little from his high ambition, and hinted that if she thought fit, she might listen to the young Earl of—. Alice was not inclined to listen, and gave the earl plainly to understand that she was not inclined to become his countess. The earl, however, persevered, and Mr. Herbert now began to add his influence, but Alice was obdurate, and reminded her father of a promise he had made, never to press her marriage with any one. Mr. Herbert seemed more annoyed than Alice expected, walked up and down the room, in silence, and on hearing it, shut himself up with Mrs. Herbert for nearly two hours. What took place Alice did not know, but Mrs. Herbert from that moment looked grave and anxious—Mr. Herbert insisted that the earl should be received at the house as a friend, though he urged his daughter no more, and balls and parties succeeded each other so rapidly, that the quieter inhabitants of Portland Place, wished the banker and his family were where Alice herself wished to be, in Canada. Meantime, Alice became alarmed for her mother, whose health was evidently suffering from some cause; but Mrs. Herbert would consult no physician, and her husband seemed never to perceive the state of weakness and de-

pression into which she was sinking. Alice resolved to call the matter to her father's notice, and as he now went out every morning at an early hour, she rose one day sooner than usual, and knocked at the door of his dressing room. There was no answer, and, unclosing the door, she looked in to see if he were already gone. The curtains were still drawn, but through them some of the morning beams found their way; and by the dim sickly light, Alice beheld an object that made her clasp her hands and tremble violently. Her father's chair before the dressing table was vacant; but beside it lay upon the floor, something like the figure of a man asleep.

Alice approached, with her heart beating so violently that she could hear it; and there was no other sound in the room. She knelt down beside him; it was her father. She could not hear him breathe, and she drew back the curtains. He was as pale as marble, and his eyes were open, but fixed. She uttered not a sound, but with wild eyes gazed round the room, thinking of what she should do. Her mother was in the chamber at the side of the dressing room; but Alice, thoughtful, even in the deepest agitation, feared to call her, and rang the bell for her father's valet. The man came and raised his master, but Mr. Herbert had evidently been dead some hours. Poor Alice wept terribly, but still she thought of her mother, and she made no noise, and the valet was silent too, for, in lifting the dead body to the sofa, he had found a small vial, and was gazing on it intently.

"I had better put this away. Miss Herbert," he said at length, in a low voice; "I had better put this away before any one else comes."

Alice gazed at the vial with her tearful eyes. It was marked "Prussic acid! poison! poison!"

This was but the commencement of many sorrows. Though the coroner's jury had pronounced that Mr. Herbert had died a natural death, yet every one declared that he had poisoned himself, especially when it was found that he had died utterly insolvent. That all his last great speculation had failed, and that the news of his absolute beggary had reached him on the night preceding his decease. Then came all the horrors of such circumstances to poor Alice and her mother—the funeral—the examination of the papers;—the sale of the house and furniture;—the tiger's claws of the law rending open the house in all its dearest associations;—the commiseration of friends;—the taunts and scoffs of those who envied and hated in silence.

Then to poor Alice herself, came the worst blow, the sickness and death bed of a mother—sickness and death in poverty. The last scene was just over, the earth was just laid upon the coffin of Mrs. Herbert; and Alice sat with her tears dropping fast, thinking of the sad "What next?" when a letter was given to her, and she saw the hand writing of her uncle in Canada. She had written to him of her father's death, and now he answered full of tenderness and affection, begging his sister and niece instantly to join him in the new land which he had made his country. All the topics of consolation which philosophy ever discovered or devised to soothe man under the manifold sorrows and cares of life are not worth a blade of rye grass in comparison with "one word of true affection." It was the only balm that Alice Herbert's heart could have received, and though it did not heal the wound, it tranquilized its aching.

Mrs. Herbert, though not rich, had not been altogether portionless, and her small fortune was all that Alice now descended to call her own. There had been, indeed, a considerable jointure, but that Alice renounced from feelings that you will understand. Economy, however, was now a necessity, and after taking a passage in one of the cheapest vessels she could find bound for Quebec, a vessel that all the world has heard of, named the St. Lawrence, she set out for the good city of Bristol, where she arrived in safety on the 10th day of May, 1833.

I must now, however, turn to the history of Ashton.

It was just after the business in Canada was settled, that he entered the room in Quebec, where several of the officers of his regiment were assembled in various occupations—one writing a letter to go by the packet which was

just about to sail, two looking out of the window at the nothing which was doing in the streets, and one reading the newspaper. There were three or four other journals on the table, and Ashton took up one of them. As usual, he turned to the record of three great things in life, and read, first the marriages—then the deaths; and, as he did so, he saw—"Suddenly, at his house in Portland Place, William Anthony Herbert, Esquire." The paper did not drop from his hand, although he was much moved and surprised; but his sensations were very mixed, and although, he it said truly, he gave his first thoughts, and they were sorrowful, to the dead, the second were given to Alice Herbert, and he asked himself, "Is it possible that she can ever be mine? She was certainly much agitated when I left her!"

"Here's a bad business!" cried the man who was reading the other newspaper. "The Herberts are all gone to smash, and I had six hundred pounds there. You are in for it too, Ashton. Look there! They talk of three shillings in the pound."

Henry Ashton took the paper and read the account of all that occurred in London, and then he took his hat, and walked to head quarters. What he said or did there is nobody's business but his own; but certain it is, that by the beginning of the very next week, he was in the gulf of St. Lawrence. Fair winds wafted him soon to England, but in St. George's Channel all went contrary, and the ship was knocked about for three days without making much way. A fit of impatience had come upon Henry Ashton, and when he thought of Alice Herbert, and all she must have suffered, his heart beat strangely. One of those little incidents occurred about this time that make or mar men's destinies. A coasting boat from Swansea to Wiston, came within hail, and Ashton, tired of the other vessel, put a portmanteau, a servant, and himself, into the little skimmer of the seas, and was in a few hours landed safely at the pleasant watering-place of Wiston super mare. It wanted yet an hour or two of night, and therefore a post-chaise was soon rolling the young officer, his servant, and his portmanteau towards Bristol, on their way to London. He arrived at a reasonable hour, but yet, some one of the many things that fills inns, had happened in Bristol that day, and Henry drove to the Bush, to the Falcon, and the Fountain, and several others, before he could get a place of rest. At length, he found two comfortable rooms in a small hotel near the port, and sat down to his supper by a warm fire, when an Irish sailor put his head into the room and asked if he were the lady that was to go down to the St. Lawrence the next day? Henry informed him that he was not a lady, and that, as he had just come from the St. Lawrence, he was not going back again, upon which the man withdrew to seek further.

Ten, eleven, twelve o'clock struck, and Henry Ashton pulled off his boots, and went to bed. At two o'clock he awoke, feeling heated and feverish; and to cool himself, he began to think of Alice Herbert. He found it by no means a good plan, for he felt warmer than before, and soon a suffocating feel came over him, and he thought he smelt a strong smell of burning wood. His bedroom was one of those unfortunate inn bed-rooms that are placed under the immediate care and protection of a sitting-room, which, like a Spanish Duenna, will let nobody in who does not pass by their door. He put on his dressing-gown, therefore, and issued out into the sitting-room, and there the smell was much stronger; there was a considerable crackling and roaring, which had something alarming in it, and he consequently opened the outer door. All he could now see, was a thick smoke filling the corridor; through which came a red glare from the direction of the staircase, but he heard those sounds of burning wood, which are not to be mistaken, and in a minute after, loud knocking at doors, ringing of bells, and shouts of "Fire! fire!" showed that the calamity had become apparent to the people in the street. He saw all the rushing forth of naked men and women, which generally follows such a catastrophe, and the opening all the doors of the house, as if for the express purpose of blowing fire into a flame. There were hallooings and shoutings, there were screamings and

tears, and what between the rushing sound of the devouring element, and the voice of human suffering or fear, the noise was enough to wake the dead.

Henry Ashton thought of his portmanteau, and wondered where his servant was; but seeing, by a number of people driven back from the great staircase by flames, that there was no time to be lost, he made his way down by a smaller one, and in a minute or two reached the street. The engines by this time had arrived; an immense crowd was gathering together, the terrified tenants of the inn were rushing forth, and in the midst Henry Ashton remarked one young woman wring her hands, and exclaiming, "Oh, my poor young mistress! my poor young lady!" "Where is she, my good girl?" demanded the young soldier.

"In number eleven," cried the girl, "in number eleven. Her bedroom is within the setting-room, and she will never hear the noise."

"There she is," cried one of the bystanders who overheard, "there she is, I dare say."

Ashton looked up towards the house, through the lower windows of which the flames were pouring forth; and across the casement which seemed next to the very room he himself had occupied, he saw the figure of a woman, in her night dress pass rapidly.

"A ladder," he cried, "a ladder, for God's sake! There is some one there, whoever it be!"

No ladder could be got, and Henry Ashton looked round in vain.

"The back staircase is of stone," he cried; "she may be saved that way!"

"Ay, but the corridor is on fire," said one of the waiters; "you had better not try, sir; it cannot be done."

Henry Ashton darted away; into the inn; up the staircase; but the corridor was on fire, as the man had said, and the flames rushed up to the very door of the rooms he had lately tenanted. He rushed on, however, recollecting that he had seen a side door out of his own sitting room. He dashed in, caught the handle of the lock of the side door, and shook it violently, for it was fastened.

"I will open it," cried a voice from within, that sounded strangely familiar to his ear.

The lock turned—the door opened—and Henry Ashton and Alice Herbert stood face to face.

"God of Heaven!" he exclaimed, catching her in his arms. But he gave no time for explanation, and hurried back with her towards the door of his own room. The corridor, however, was impassable.

"You will be lost! you will be lost! he exclaimed, holding her to his heart.

"And you have thrown away your own life to save mine!" said Alice.

"I will die with you, at least!" replied Henry Ashton; "that is some consolation. But, no! thank God they have got a ladder—they are raising it up—dear girl, you are saved?"

He had felt Alice lie heavy on his bosom; and when he looked down, whether it was fear, or the effect of the stifling heat, or hearing such words from his lips, he found that she had fainted.

"It is as well," he said; "it is as well! and, as soon as the ladder was raised, he bore her out, holding her firmly yet tenderly in his bosom. There was a death-like stillness below. The ladder shook under his feet; the flames came forth and flicked the rounds on which his steps were placed; but steadily, firmly, calmly, the young soldier pursued his way. He bore all that he valued on earth in his arms, and it was no moment to give one thought to fear.

When his last footstep touched the ground, an universal shout burst forth from the crowd, and even reached the ear of Alice herself; but, ere she could recover completely, she was in the comfortable drawing-room of a good merchant's house, some way further down the same street.

The St. Lawrence sailed on the following day for Quebec, and, as you well know, went down in the terrible hurricane which swept the Atlantic in the summer of that year, bearing with her to the depths of ocean, every living thing that she had carried out from England. But on the day that she weighed anchor, Alice sat in the drawing room of the merchant's house, with her hand clasped in that of Henry Ashton; and, ere many months were over, the tears for those dear beings she had lost, were chased by happier drops, as she gave her hand to the man she loved with all the depth of first affection, but whom she would never see again had it not been for THE FIRE.